

OCT 1995

"IN PRAISE OF OLDER FEDERATIONS:

CANADA AFTER OCTOBER 30, 1995"

NOTES FOR A TALK BY

PETER G. WHITE

PRESIDENT, COUNCIL FOR CANADIAN UNITY

THE CHANCELLOR'S CLUB DINNER

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY DINING CENTRE

CALGARY, ALBERTA

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1995

I am honoured and delighted to have the opportunity of addressing such a distinguished audience at this critical moment in our nation's history.

In 1745 Benjamin Franklin wrote a notorious essay, usually known as "Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress". His advice to the young man, "that in all your Amours you should prefer old women to young ones", inspired Canadian writer Stephen Vizinczey to entitle his 1965 novel, "In Praise of Older Women". Benjamin Franklin's reasons for this advice included his view that older women "have more Knowledge of the World and their Minds are better stor'd with Observations", and that "thro' more Experience, they are more prudent and discreet in conducting an Intrigue to prevent Suspicion. The Commerce with them is therefore safer with regard to your Reputation." His last and most famous reason for counselling his young friend to prefer older mistresses was that "They are so gratefull"

Although my reasons are somewhat different -- though not entirely -- I would not hesitate to advise a young person in search of the best form of government to prefer Older Federations over all other kinds of government. And of all the world's older federations, I would advise that Canada has the greatest potential for a stimulating and satisfying long-term relationship. My reasons would include the view that Canada has seen it all before, that she is the most understanding of countries, and that she has always shown great flexibility, adaptability, imagination and subtlety in dealing with the appetites of her citizenry.

Canada is indeed one of the world's oldest federations, and by many measures Canada is indeed the best country in the world. This is not a coincidence. The federal

system of government is so successful because it can accommodate within a single country people who share the same fundamental values and principles, but who may not all share the same paramount interests and needs. The very purpose of federalism is to permit the achievement of unity and diversity in the same country at the same time.

Federalism does this by the essentially simple device of permitting the exercise of supreme governmental authority by more than one level of government, each paramount and autonomous in its own field, as assigned by the constitution of the federation. Before the development of federalism, a country could have but one supreme government, and all its citizens had to be subject to essentially the same laws everywhere in the country. Such a unitary system has difficulty dealing with important and legitimate differences in the fundamental interests of its citizens. With the tremendous increase in the mobility of people from country to country and within countries, the populations of many countries are today much less homogeneous and monolithic than was the case when their unitary system of government was devised. Federalism has unquestionably turned out to be the form of government that is the most flexible and adaptable to such changing circumstances, and the most able to satisfy the needs -- or should I say the appetites -- of heterogeneous populations.

But even the best federal system is subject today to great strains and challenges. And if it does not evolve to meet them, there can be no absolute assurance that it will endure. Human institutions are in this respect like biological species: if they do not remain adapted to changes in their environment by evolving as required, they will not survive.

Canada today faces a number of challenges which, either singly or in some combination, could threaten the very endurance of our nation, unless our federal system of government continues to evolve in order to deal with them effectively. I will list six of the most important ones:

- 1) The relationship between Canada and the United States.
- 2) The relationship between anglophones and francophones, and the corresponding relationship between Quebec and the rest of Canada.
- 3) The relationship between native Canadians and non-natives.
- 4) The position of Canadians whose mother tongue is neither English nor French.
- 5) The relationship between Central Canada on the one hand, and Western Canada, Atlantic Canada and the North on the other hand.
- 6) The continuing, and in some cases increasing, disparity in the distribution of wealth among regions and individuals.

Although it is a natural human tendency to want to resolve a problem once and for all, I think it should be obvious to all of us that none of the foregoing challenges are really capable of such a final resolution, by their very nature. These are not problems that can be solved; rather, they are issues that must be constantly and continually managed. These issues have been with us throughout our history, and no doubt they will always be with us. And their effective management may from time to time require adjustments in the operation and even in the constitution of our federal system of government.

I hope that after the Quebec referendum on October 30, the Council for Canadian Unity, along with other Canadians, will be able to turn our attention to other issues in addition to the relationship with Quebec. But given that the referendum is only twelve days away, perhaps you will forgive me if I concentrate this evening on the outlook for that particular relationship, and for the relationship between anglophones and francophones generally throughout Canada, after October 30.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: if all Canadians had the same language as their mother tongue, we would not be having this referendum. This is profoundly a language-based issue -- not culture, not religion, not legal systems, but language -- and it is of such fundamental importance because most human beings see their mother tongue as a central element of their basic personal identity. Language, along with such characteristics as gender, religion, colour, ethnicity, history or territory, is often seen as a basic point of common identity and of differentiation from others. In Canada, at least for francophones, language is generally more important to the common identity than the other factors.

So my basic premise is that the fundamental issue that must be managed in this relationship is the condition and outlook of the French language and of mother-tongue francophones in Canada: their right to learn, speak and use French; the health and strength of French-language institutions; the legal and political safeguards of these rights and institutions; and the prevalence of the perception that francophones or Quebec are discriminated against because they speak French, or are not able to take full charge of defending and promoting their own most vital interests.

There are four principal reasons why this is so:

First, the desire to live mainly in one's native language is an extremely deep and primal human need, at once emotional, intellectual and practical. The strength and importance of this need is often difficult to appreciate for someone whose ability to use their native language is generally taken for granted, and has never been seriously questioned or threatened. But if this right is denied to you, or if your language becomes a basis for discrimination, your reaction is likely to be very strong.

Second, at least since 1760, both the French and the English languages have been the national or public languages in Canada. No other non-native language has ever enjoyed this status. Speakers of other languages who have come to live in Canada since 1760 have accepted this fact, and have implicitly or explicitly agreed that they, or at least their descendants, would live mainly in English or French. Francophones are very proud and protective of the status of their language and their right to live fully in it.

Third, of our two national languages, only French is at any risk in terms of its long-range health and security. The English language in Canada is in absolutely no danger, even in Quebec. In fact, its very strength is a large part of the problem. It is the fact that Canadian francophones constitute a small group of some 6.8 million people (25% of Canada's population), entirely surrounded by almost 300 million anglophones who share the most vibrant and expansionist linguistic culture in the world, that puts francophones in constant danger of assimilation and forces them to be eternally vigilant in defence of their ability to live fully in French in all aspects of their lives.

Fourth, francophones are in the minority both in Canada as a whole, and in every province and territory except Quebec. As anglophones gradually came to dominate Canada by sheer weight of numbers over the years following the Conquest, there is no doubt that francophones were frequently discriminated against on the basis of religion and language. Even in Quebec, they saw the Scots, the English and others become economically dominant for many decades, and it has only been since the so-called Quiet Revolution of the 1960's that francophones have gradually regained the upper hand in the province's economy. This has led to a strong desire among francophone Quebecers to run their own essential affairs without having to answer to anglophone-dominated institutions, often including the federal government.

The viability and strength of the so-called French fact in Canada is further complicated by the fact that although most Canadian francophones live in Quebec, there are still about one million mother-tongue francophones who live in minority situations outside Quebec; and there are some 700,000 anglophones living in Quebec, who still constitute the largest official-language minority in any province.

Although francophones are a 25% minority in Canada as a whole, and are in the minority in every province and territory except Quebec, they nevertheless form an 80% majority in Quebec. And Quebec, as the only jurisdiction in North America with a predominantly francophone electorate, consequently has the only government in North America permanently dominated and controlled throughout by francophones. As such, of all Canada's governments, the government of Quebec is understandably the one that feels the greatest responsibility and has the greatest concern for protecting and promoting the ability of francophones to live fully in French. No other

provincial government faces such a daunting task. In this respect, the government of Quebec clearly has responsibilities that are over and above those of all the other provinces, and it is clearly different from every other provincial government.

Although this strong governmental support is very effective and reassuring to francophones who live in Quebec, unfortunately it is of little comfort to the million francophones outside Quebec -- over half a million in Ontario (5.4% of the provincial population), a quarter of a million in New Brunswick (34.6%), and the rest in the other provinces and territories, including almost 65,000 in Alberta (2.5%) who constitute the third largest francophone minority in the country. (All figures are from the 1991 Census of Canada.)

So all of the foregoing facts and considerations form the background for Canada's ongoing language debate. The challenge for francophones -- and hence for all Canadians who wish to preserve our country -- is how best to ensure their ability to live fully in French. Francophones in Canada have been compared to a cube of sugar beside a gallon of coffee: It is an image that certainly helps you see their problem. A natural reaction is to band together to defend themselves -- hence the so-called tribal mentality among Quebec francophones, often criticized by non-members of the tribe.

Yet in Quebec, francophone opinion has always been split between those who felt that being part of Canada brought enough advantages to outweigh the partial surrender of sovereignty, and those who believed that they had to become fully sovereign in order to ensure their linguistic survival and freedom from economic discrimination. So far, the former opinion has always prevailed, and I am confident

that it will once again on October 30. But the debate among Quebec francophones will never completely end, and there will always be a strong minority who dream of full sovereignty for Quebec.

The million francophones outside Quebec, on the other hand, have never really had the luxury of considering the option of full sovereignty over their own affairs -- at least not since the Expulsion of the Acadians or the Riel Rebellion. Except in New Brunswick, their small numbers give them little political influence and almost no control over vital institutions, and in most provinces they appear to be gradually being assimilated despite their best efforts. In fact the Bloc Quebecois claims that there are really only 640,000 francophones outside Quebec, because the other 360,000 or so have already been assimilated and should not be counted, even though their mother tongue may have been French. But nevertheless they are all still struggling to be granted at least full control over their own francophone educational systems, as the bare minimum requirement for their linguistic survival.

The large anglophone minority in Quebec is in a very different situation, and has few problems. They have always had their own schools and school boards, their own universities, their own hospitals, their own newspapers, radio and television stations, libraries, cinemas, publishers, churches, etc., none of which have ever been seriously threatened, and some of which are constitutionally guaranteed. In addition, they controlled the business world for generations, and are still economically powerful. They belong to the dominant language group in the world, and live next door to the source of its overwhelming cultural manifestations, on which they can gorge themselves at will. So there is virtually no similarity between the position of Quebec

anglophones and the position of francophone minorities in the other provinces -- again, with the honorable exception of New Brunswick, which has made serious efforts to sustain and bolster its large francophone minority.

To summarize the debate among Quebec francophones, the question has always been whether they are better off controlling one province of the Canadian federation without the full powers of a state, while playing an important role in the federal government -- a combination likely to result in greater prosperity and greater influence in the world, while foregoing complete authority over such matters as taxation, monetary authority, trade policy, immigration, manpower or labour market training, broadcasting and communications, external relations, etc.; or whether the advantages of complete sovereignty and autonomy -- being fully masters in their own house -- outweigh the obvious risks of being smaller, weaker and more isolated.

Not surprisingly, most Quebecers would like to have it both ways -- to have their cake and eat it too. Polls consistently show that if Quebec were absolutely guaranteed a subsequent economic and political partnership with Canada, a substantial majority of Quebecers would vote for sovereignty. As humorist Yvon Deschamps put it several years ago, Quebecers want an independent Quebec within a strong and united Canada.

Quebecers also have a nagging guilt about abandoning their francophone brothers and sisters in the other provinces, but they also feel that there is very little that they can do to help them within the present federal structure. True, the federal government, and more recently the courts, have been of occasional assistance to

francophone minorities outside Quebec, although this would likely end if Quebec were to leave Canada. But this is still a far cry from having the full weight and strength of a francophone-controlled provincial government to defend their interests, as francophone Quebecers enjoy. In passing, I should note that the Reform Party's proposal that issues of language and culture should be made matters of purely provincial jurisdiction would inevitably sound the eventual death knell for all the francophone minorities outside Quebec and New Brunswick, given the political and economic realities in the other provinces.

So where does all this leave us after October 30? If the No side wins by, say, 55% to 45%, that will mean that almost half of Quebecers, and probably a majority of Quebec francophones, will have voted to take the risk of leaving Canada, even without any guarantee of a future partnership. This could hardly be described as a great victory for Canada, and it would clearly demonstrate that our federation has serious problems that cannot be ignored. Although Premier Parizeau (or his successor if Mr. Parizeau resigns) is extremely unlikely to negotiate in good faith to "renew federalism", as the phrase goes -- in fact both he and Lucien Bouchard have sworn that they no longer have any interest in trying to improve Quebec's position within Canada -- many Quebecers will not share this view, and sooner or later a Quebec premier (perhaps Daniel Johnson) will be ready to try yet again to obtain the agreement of the rest of Canada to changes in our federal arrangements and perhaps even in our constitution. In this quest he may have several new allies, namely the premiers of a number of provinces who now also wish to see substantial changes.

Although Daniel Johnson has steadfastly refused to state the details of his

position on constitutional reform, on the sound strategic principle that the onus in the referendum is on the separatists to justify their radical proposal, and not on the defenders of federalism, Mr. Johnson nevertheless did outline his "Liberal vision" for the post-referendum years last August. He said that Meech Lake and Charlottetown showed that the recent approach to constitutional reform had reached its limits, and that our real challenge is to find the appropriate process for modernizing the constitution. He enunciated five guiding principles for his party:

- 1) Quebec forms a distinct society;
- 2) the National Assembly must guarantee the development of Quebecers in their language;
- 3) Quebec is best served by staying in Canada;
- 4) the Quebec Liberal Party is resolutely "quebecois";
- 5) Quebec must be an active partner in Canada and must participate in any reform of the constitution.

This is not the demagogic rhetoric of an extremist. There is nothing frightening here, even to the most anti-francophone Canadian. These are eminently reasonable principles from a moderate and responsible Canadian political leader. The only point that may be even mildly controversial is the reference to "distinct society". And as former Albertan William Thorsell observed in his column in the Globe and Mail last Saturday, at the time of Meech Lake "the repudiation by many anglophones of Quebec's claim to being a 'distinct society within Canada' was an affront to essential facts of Canada's history and Quebec's understanding of that history."

What we must all try to do after the referendum is to once again seek in good

faith new ways of accommodating the legitimate desires and concerns of Canada's francophone minority, as we have done from time to time throughout our history. We all know that we are stronger and richer together than apart. If we take the view that a No victory, no matter how narrow, settles the issue and takes it off the table, we will be asking for trouble. In justice and in simple self-interest, we cannot turn our backs on the serious disaffection of a significant number of our fellow Canadians.

Knowing Canada and Canadians as I do, I have every confidence that we will eventually emerge from this national crisis stronger than ever. That will require three things: the serious effort and empathy needed to understand the issues, the goodwill to try earnestly to address them, and the enlightened leadership to show us the way. Canadians have always managed to find these qualities in ourselves in the past, and we owe it to our forefathers, to ourselves and to our posterity to do so once again, in our time and in our generation.